

Why do young people use online forums for mental health and emotional support? benefits and challenges

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Abstract

A qualitative approach was used to explore young people's experiences of using synchronous and asynchronous online forums to gain insight into the use of online services for mental health.

Nineteen young people took part in two online synchronous focus groups facilitated by the online counselling service, KOOTH.com, to reflect upon the use of these two types of forum. Inductive thematic analysis indicated that forums do not replace the role of a counsellor, but they provide a valuable place for young people to gain additional, lower level support requirements. Individuals suggested the forums were supportive environments where they felt able to interact to share helpful advice and ask questions, making them feel less alone and more connected to others. Issues of concern tended to be around the affordances of the site and technical issues.

Keywords: online forums, young people, mental health, adolescent help seeking, qualitative research

Introduction

Mental health has become a significant concern for young people, with a large proportion of serious mental health issues believed to begin before the age of 25 (Kessler et al., 2007, data from World Health Organisation mental health surveys) and impacting all aspects of young people's lives globally (Patel et al., 2007). Due to the developmental changes that are prevalent for this age group, it is commonly argued that young people have unique needs that should be accommodated by service providers (Wilson et al., 2011). With this in mind, those who support young people with mental health difficulties commonly advocate adopting a bio-psycho-social perspective so as to account for the complex array of influences upon young individuals' lives (Hanley, Frzina & Nizami, 2017). In this stage in life, research conducted in Australia suggests that young people's independence and autonomy is growing, thus motivating them to have personal influence upon their own well-being (Wilson et al, 2011). At the same time, it is reported from studies conducted In

Australia and the UK respectively that some young people are reluctant to engage in offline mental health services (Rickwood et al., 2005; Turner et al., 2007). In contrast, a UK study posits that young people are continuously exploring and recognising the affordances of social media (Berriman & Thomson, 2015). The internet is increasingly accessed for health information and services, since it affords convenience and anonymity, factors that are shown to be especially appealing for young people within the UK and USA (Gray et al., 2005; Evans, 2014; Ersahin & Hanley, 2017; Fox & Duggan, 2013). Thus, online mental health services therefore have the potential to reach young people and offer them an avenue for both professional and peer support (Horgan, McCarthy, & Sweeney, 2013). With such trends in mind however, it is essential to understand how such ways of working might be best supported (Kendal et al, 2016).

Online support is available around the clock, with no geographical restrictions (Malik & Coulson, 2011; Chan et al, 2016). Further it has the potential to connect people from the comfort of their own homes (Coulson & Knibb, 2007). Research conducted in the UK, USA, and Israel examining online forums that support young people with mental health issues has found that these services can provide numerous benefits. These include the therapeutic benefit of writing (Richards, 2009), the ability to share their experiences with other people with similar experiences and feelings (Barak & Dolev-Cohen, 2006; Elwell, Grogan, & Coulson, 2010; Horgan et al., 2013; Johnsen, Rosenvinge, & Gammon, 2002; Love et al., 2012; Prescott, Hanley, & Ujhelyi, 2017), helping young people feel less isolated and alone, and helping to normalise their experiences (Prescott et al., 2017; Trondsen & Tjora, 2014). Emotional and informational peer support is evident in online communication (Barak & Dolev-Cohen, 2006; Elwell et al., 2010; Horgan et al, 2013; Johnsen et al., 2002; Love et al., 2012; Prescott et al., 2017) and this support can be offered through either a directive or non-directive way (Prescott et al., 2017).

Moderated online mental health forums are often viewed positively by young people and provide them with a confidential and safe environment to seek support (King et al., 2006; Webb,

Burns, & Collin, 2008). The online environment often facilitates increased self-disclosure (Richards 2009; Kummervold et al., 2002; Walther & Boyd, 2002) with less inhibition (Suler, 2004; Hanley et al., 2017), allowing young people to disclose and discuss issues they may feel embarrassed to discuss in a face-to-face setting (Johnsen et al., 2002; Hanley, 2011; Trondsen & Tjora, 2014; Ravert, Boren, & Wiebke, 2015; Hanckel & Morris, 2014; Sherman & Greenfield, 2013). This is particularly pertinent to mental health issues due to the stigma often associated with such issues (Turner et al., 2007). Accordingly, research conducted in both Australia and the UK indicates that online counselling has the potential to reach unique client groups (Rickwood et al., 2005; Hanley et al., 2017), with client groups who may not ordinarily seeking help in person doing so. It may also encourage people to seek help earlier (Rickwood et al., 2005).

Ersahin and Hanley (2017), in a recent systematic review, conclude that there is an emerging body of research that demonstrates the potential of online support services, such as counselling and text-based forums for young people. However, despite this potential, they also highlight that the research base remains limited and that further work is still needed to understand online practices. Furthermore, despite the growing interest in online mental health services and provision, Chan et al. (2016) have posited that there is a lack of qualitative research exploring the perceived benefits and drawbacks of seeking help online as reported by help seekers. Chan et al. (2016) therefore investigated the attitudes of Australian university students seeking mental health support online. Findings revealed concerns around privacy and confidentiality issues, difficulty expressing emotions, and resource quality. The benefits included anonymity, accessibility and stigma avoidance. The authors acknowledged a major limitation to their study was that the participants did not have mental health issues. In addition, the study was conducted in a university setting and only involved students. Therefore, the findings may have limited resonance to other populations such as young people with mental health problems.

Rationale

A recent report by the Education Policy Institute in the UK stated that ‘online mental health support is an emerging area of service provision with the potential to increase access to care’ (Firth, 2017, p. 46). The report also stressed the need for further research into the area, in order to fully understand its value to support young people. This study adds a qualitative insight into online mental health support through synchronous and asynchronous forums. In a previous study, we investigated how young people use the static, asynchronous online mental health forums hosted by KOOTH.com (Prescott et al., 2017). This examined over 3600 posts and responses posted by service users to investigate how young people communicate in this media. This 2017 study adds to the research into what young people discuss via online forums to support their mental health, as well as to provide insights into how they support each other through peer support. The study also provided insight into the way young people communicate support through either a directive (providing explicit suggestions) or nondirective (sharing their own experiences) approach. A major strength of the study is that it was conducted on a large data set of posts and response, from a real world data set (Prescott et al., 2018). However, the study did not allow for a deep understanding of how young people use the site in conjunction with other counselling and health services, both online and offline. The forum data did not allow us to gain an understanding of how the posts and the content of the posts were received by the young people or the impact of receiving comments to posts in terms of how helpful the responses actually were. There was also no insight from this research into the downside to online forums, a suggestion for further consideration. This current paper fills some of these gaps.

In a 2015 Australian study, Rickwood et al. investigated the social influences of seeking mental health support. The quantitative, self-report study revealed that the dominant influence for seeking support online was the young person themselves; in contrast, offline support moved from family influences in adolescence to self-influencing in late adolescence. This study provides an interesting insight into the value, and the potential, of online support for young people. In another quantitative study, Montagni et al. (2018) emphasised the value of online support and information

for health and wellbeing to university students in France. The Montagni et al. study also highlights the potential of digital health interventions replacing traditional offline services if promoted by official institutions such as the university. The current study adds to the literature in the area, in that, it is qualitative in nature, allowing a sample, albeit small, of young people to express their views and experiences of the online support services the static and live forums provide.

The current study aims to add to these researches and to gain insight into how young people with mental health and emotional needs report on their use of both the synchronous and asynchronous online forums available on KOOTH. It does this by asking service users at KOOTH.com to describe how they use these forums to seek support and what they view as the benefits and challenges of this type of support. Building upon previous research focusing upon the benefits and challenges of forum usage (Chan et al., 2016), we sought to gain the views of young people about how and why they use both the live and static forums. In particular the study focuses upon what young services users perceive to be the benefits and challenges associated with using live (i.e. synchronous) and static (i.e. asynchronous) forums. Although the focus groups were conducted to understand the views of both the live and static forums, they were often discussed interchangeably rather than individually.

Method

A qualitative research design was used to generate rich depictions of the service users' experiences (Atieno, 2009). Given the limited body of literature looking at young people's experiences of online service engagement, the project explicitly looked to provide a direct report of the views of young service users. Considerations for working sensitively with this age group were therefore accounted for throughout the design (Shaw et al., 2011). Approval for the study was given by the research institution's ethics committee, UK, in April 2016.

The project was conducted in partnership with KOOTH.com, an organisation that provides a free at the point of delivery, anonymous and confidential online counselling service for young people

aged 11-25 experiencing emotional and mental health difficulties. The KOOTH.com website offers young people a number of services including drop-in chats with trained counsellors, booked one-to-one chats with trained counsellors, a themed moderated message forum, frequent live forums, a secure web-based email, and an online magazine. Young people register on the site using an anonymous user name.

Participants and sampling

A convenience sample of young service users was used in the study. The project was advertised on KOOTH.com prior to the live forums, with participants being reminded about the study at the start of each live forum. Participation in the study was therefore voluntary and, due to the anonymous nature of KOOTH.com, all participants were also anonymous in the study. Participants could leave the forum at any time and the demographic information shown in Table 1 was provided separately by KOOTH.com, with the permission of those involved.

Participants ($N = 19$) were mostly female ($n=15$), reported having a formal mental health diagnosis ($n=10$), were aged between 12 -23, and had been using KOOTH.com from two months to three years. Table 1 provides more detailed participant information. KOOTH.com tended to be the only online counselling service the young people accessed. Participants had been told about the services offered by KOOTH.com from a number of different personal and professional sources such as friends (2), General Practitioner (GP) (2), from other support services such as Samaritans (2) and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) (1). The most frequently cited place was from school/college (12), from either the school website, posters around school, school counsellors or teachers. The offline support the young people received included: counsellor or therapist (11), support worker (5), CAMHS (5), social worker (1) and GP (1).

Table 1. Participant information

Gender	Female	15
	Male	4

Age	Age range	12-23 years (<i>M</i> = 17)
Formal mental health diagnosis (self-report)	Yes No No answer	10 4 5
Presenting issue (many with multiple issues)	Anxiety & Depression Autism Eating disorder Borderline Personality Disorder Gender Dysphoria	9 5 4 2 2 1

Online Focus Groups

Two text based synchronous online focus groups (Mann & Stewart, 2000) were used to facilitate real-time collaboration and receive immediate responses to questions. These focus groups were facilitated by a moderator of the UK-based KOOTH.com service. As noted above, we sought young people's experiences of using online forums as part of the online counselling service with a view to gaining insights into how and why they use the forum. The KOOTH.com moderator acted as a facilitator of the focus groups, which were conducted as part of a live forum discussion, prompting responses on the behalf of the research team. This approach was deemed the most suitable since the moderator already had a good rapport with the young people to engage them in the focus group and receive more accurate responses through this live forum.

Nineteen young people took part in the study over two live forums on the 18th (*n*=9) and 23rd May 2016 (*n*=10). Each focus group lasted for approximately one hour. Due to the nature of the data collected, the live forum data provided the research team with two synchronous transcripts for analysis. The transcripts consisted of over 400 comments/responses with a word count of 1945 for Group 1 and 1736 for Group 2 (including user names and questions). Participants were asked a number of questions via the live forum. Not all participants responded to each question, but the method of data collection allowed participants the opportunity to comment to the questions they

wanted to. Research in the area of online synchronous focus groups suggest that they are a good medium to engage young people who feel confident online (Fox, Morris, & Rumsey, 2007). Indeed, participants showed little inhibition in discussing their personal experiences and opinions since the participants were active users of the forums and comfortable discussing issues, a factor that supports the appropriateness of this method. However, a limitation with the immediacy of the synchronous focus group (as opposed to an asynchronous focus group which would have lasted a longer period of time) was that some individuals were unable to spend as much time as they may have wanted thinking about their answers to questions. For instance, one young person responded: *"I can't think of anything, I'll answer this later on if I think of something"*.

The data was collected via a facilitator from KOOTH.com who had an established relationship with the participants. This enabled the research team to have some level of distance from the participants and not influence the process of data collection. The questions were divided into four sections. Sections 1 and 2 explored the issues and concerns of the participant as well as how they used the online forums in terms of the length of time, frequency of use and other avenues of online as well as offline support they received. Section 3 considered why they used the forums in terms of the benefits they received from the forums, whereas Section 4 considered the challenges participants had found with both the static and live forums. Although the focus groups were conducted to understand the views of both the live and static forums, they were often discussed interchangeably rather than individually.

Data analysis

The qualitative approach used to analyse the data was inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015) using Nvivo version 10 software. An inductive approach was used since the analysis was grounded in the data rather than existing theories. In order to ascertain and increase inter-coder reliability and the reliability of the results, transcripts were independently coded to develop a coding framework. Any subsequent additional theming was

discussed for coherence during independent analysis (see Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). The quotes presented in the findings section are the actual typed words of the participants. The verbatim responses have been left unedited so as to provide the reader with a more accurate sense of the views of the young people.

Findings

How and why do young people use forums for support?

Responses indicated that the young people in this study used the forums for both online support and practical advice. Narratives revealed that, in addition to seeking support from a counsellor online or offline, the forums had a specific value in supporting young people by providing them with another option that is not restrained by the perceived limited scope of mental health services. However, the young people did seek support from a counsellor, either online (P1: *"I normally go and talk to my [KOOOTH.com] counsellor if I am worried about something personal"*) or offline (P2: *"I only go to CAMHS once a month now and it really helps chatting here in between appointments. I prefer this to CAMHS to be honest. They can put you on meds and listen to you talk but it feels like they're constantly trying to discharge you but here I'm allowed to stay as long as I like"*) before seeking support via other forms including online forums.

The young people who took part in this study were active users on both the static and live forums. They posted, read posts and commented, depending on how they felt and whether they believe they could support – P2: *"Sometimes I'm a forum lurker if I don't fancy talking and I post when something is interesting, fun or if I'm just lonely"*. How they used the forums appeared to be largely dependent on whether the young person felt they could offer some form of advice or support to others - P3: *"If I can I like to post in the forums if I feel I can offer advice or if I would like to ask for advice, but sometimes I miss the forum and read it later that night or when I feel better"*. In addition, this quote highlights the benefits young people found in reading the old, archived posts.

The benefits of using forums

A number of themes emerged regarding the perceived benefits to using the forums. Four main themes emerged (*Supportive Environment, Learning New Information, Social Aspect of Forums* and *Changing Moods*). Firstly, in relation to *Supportive Environment*, both the live and static forums were viewed by participants to be supportive and positive environments for young people with mental health and emotional needs. Further, it was suggested to be a place young people feel comfortable seeking support - P3: *"I like the fact everyone comes together to help each other, there's no one that I feel uncomfortable with at the forums. I gain ideas that I might not have come across before for different situations, but also confidence"*. This supportive online environment was also viewed an important space for these young people, providing help for distress that may not necessarily be available offline – P4: *"You can ask questions in a forum you wouldn't to friends/family. Talk to others about problems that you hide from people you know"*.

The second theme was *Learning New Information*, and reflected that many of the young people discussed the benefits of using the forums for support in terms of the information they received. The forums seemed to have provided them with practical advice and a place where they could learn something new - P5: *"I really like the live forums to meet other people and to get other people's ideas on different subjects. to learn more in general"*. As well as being a place to share ideas, forums were viewed as a place to socialise and feel connected, thus highlighting the third theme, *Social Aspect*, - P1: *"Live forums help me feel more connected with people and to learn more about different subjects and you may learn something that you have never known before xx"*. Quotes, such as this, imply that the affordances of the online forums allow young people to connect with other young people in a similar situation. An additional benefit of synchronous online forums is that users receive a response more or less right away – P2: *"I like that there's live forums because I'm very impatient"*.

The fourth and final theme from the data is *Changing Moods*. Interestingly, young people mentioned that the forums helped them to change their mood, specifically making young people feel happy and more confident - P6: *"I gain happiness!! Also, it helps me gain confidence with speaking to new people and it helps me be more sociable, it also takes me out of a crap mood."* This online confidence was also transferred to confidence offline and enabled young people to transfer to face-to-face settings - P3: *"I wouldn't have thought this time a year ago I would be able to talk to a group of people I didn't know, but with it being online, it makes it easier and helps with meeting people face to face."* Some young people seem to have enjoyed the forums as it provided a positive distraction for them - P6: *"They've always helped as a distraction and can get me calmer and happier."*

The challenges of using forums

When asked to comment on the challenges of using the forums, only a handful of comments were made. Potential reasons for this are discussed later. The themes arrived at were *Technological Issues* and *Relevance of Topics*.

A majority of the comments related to the first theme, *Technological Issues*. The comments tended to relate to the technology used on the site, such as not being able to edit what you write due to the synchronous nature of the live forums, or due to technical issues such as a time delay between comments. Some suggestions for site improvements were also mentioned. For example, notifications if someone posted in your topic/thread – P4: *"Old topics you started up get posted on months after and you would never know unless you actively went to find it either in the "all my posts" or through the forum list. Also, as well as the "all my posts" there could be an "all my topics" to separate your own topics from the others. So yeah a lack of notifications and an "all my topics" section"*. Similarly, P4: *"sometimes a topic doesn't get seen and may not get replied to even though people would if they saw it."*

In relation to the final theme, *Relevance of Topics*, one participant stated – P2: “*sometimes specific topics don’t apply to me and I don’t really know what to say.*” This suggests that some users may feel the need to help others with their comments and to participate in forum activities even when they do not relate to the content. In regard to this, it was acknowledged that the site had been improved through moderation.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of the study was to investigate how and why young people use online forums, considering the benefits and challenges they provide people with mental health and emotional needs. Findings from the analysis collected via the live forum questions show that both the live and static forums provide young people with a number of benefits. It is therefore clear that, for the individuals who took part in this study, online forums provided a valuable form of support. Although the forums did not replace the role of an online or offline counsellor, a factor also noted in other research (Sefi & Hanley, 2012), service users suggest that they provide a valuable place for young people to go to for additional support, and/or for more low-level support requirements (Sefi & Hanley, 2012). The findings therefore support the literature previously highlighted from the UK, USA and Australia that online forums can support young people with their mental health and emotional difficulties (Horgan et al., 2013; Prescott et al., 2017; Love et al., 2012; Elwell et al., 2010; Barak & Dolev-Cohen, 2006; Johnsen, Rosenvinge, & Gammon, 2002), provide helpful peer-led support (Ersahin & Hanley, 2017), and provide informational as well as emotional support (Horgan et al., 2013; Prescott et al., 2017; Love et al., 2012; Elwell et al., 2010; Barak & Dolev-Cohen, 2006; Johnsen et al., 2002).

There were a number of reasons given as to why young people used, and liked, the forums. The forums were generally viewed positively and were described as supportive environments where individuals were able to interact to aid the learning of new information. This occurred by sharing helpful advice and asking facilitative questions which corroborates previous findings (Prescott et al,

2017), thus impacting upon their moods by making them feel less alone and more connected in a safe environment, again corroborating previous research from the UK and Australia (Ersahin & Hanley, 2017; King et al., 2006; Webb et al., 2008). Many used the forums as a distraction, a place to socialise, and this helped improve their mood. They also stated that they found it valuable to talk about issues in this space that they were not able to discuss with people offline, finding the online environment an easier place to talk than equivalent face-to-face services, which has been found in previous studies (Johnsen et al., 2002; Trondsen & Tjora, 2014; Ravert et al., 2015; Hanckel & Morris, 2014). Further, there are also indications that individuals may also self-disclose more in these settings, again supporting findings from previous studies conducted in the USA and UK (Kummervold et al., 2002; Walther & Boyd, 2002; Hanley et al., 2017). These suggestions are in line with previous research examining the use of online forums with older student populations in an Australian context (Chan et al., 2016) and highlight the importance of anonymous online support services for some individuals, these helping to overcome any stigma associated with such services.

The young people taking part in the study had been signposted to the online service from a number of different avenues. Most frequently however this has happened within schools/colleges, and suggested well-integrated signposting to the KOOTH.com service. This signposting appeared to be valuable, with one participant in particular commenting on how they preferred the online support to the face-to-face support they had received. It also echoes the sentiments that young people are proactive in seeking the support they want (Rickwood et al., 2005). This is extremely important when considering the value of online support for young people and it highlights the importance of providing multiple avenues of support to cater for the different wants and needs of individuals (Hanley, Frzina & Nizami, 2017).

It is important to recognise that the young people involved in this study found the online forums valuable, in part, due to the role of the moderators. In particular, it was noted that the moderators contributed to the sense that the forums were supportive in nature. Such sentiments

are reflected in the broader literature from UK, USA and Australia (e.g. King et al., 2006; Webb et al., 2008). It would therefore seem important that online mental health forums provide this resource to contribute to the perception of safety for young people. Such an addition has obvious cost implications due to the management of such services.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

Although the focus groups were set up for research purposes, they were conducted as part of a scheduled live forum. Therefore, it successfully gained information from young people who frequently use, and engage in the forums, and provides an important addition to the literature by capturing the direct reports of young people with mental health and emotional needs. The views of active young service users, with self-reported mental health needs, prove an important strength of this work. Further, this study provides a deeper understanding as to how and why young people use online forums as well as the other online counselling services available for mental health and emotional support. It provides insight into how advice from peers is received via the forum and underscores how valuable the archived posts can be in continuing to support young people. The study offers some understanding, although limited, of the potential challenges to online forums.

Despite the strengths, a number of potential limitations and challenges should be acknowledged. Firstly, this was a self-selected sample of young people that use the live forums and other services at KOOTH.com. This is likely to have impacted the findings. For instance, it is noted that the young people mentioned a lot of positives and focussed on the benefits of the forums rather than challenges or drawbacks. This could be a credit to the service, or it could be due to the way the data was collected. Notably, as the young users were likely to have established relationships with the KOOTH.com moderators, these individuals were invited to run the focus groups, rather than members of the research team. Although instructions were given to these individuals, and the information gathered was very rich, this could have impacted the information that the young service users shared in the groups. For instance, it could explain why none of the concerns reported by Chan

et al. (2016), a qualitative study of 19 Australian university students, were found in the present study, such as communication difficulty, privacy and confidentiality, and resource quality. In addition, as the group moderator was not experienced in running online focus groups for research purposes, some of the questions did not facilitate the exploration of as much depth as may have been expected from a more established researcher. Alternatively, the nature of the responses could be specifically due to the participants who agreed to take part in the online focus groups for this research. Users with more positive experiences may have been more open to share their feedback than those dissatisfied with the forum, in fear of negative consequences. Finally, the study is exploratory in nature and the participants are unlikely to reflect the views of all KOOTH.com users. Further research in this area would therefore be recommended to solicit the views of different subsections of the KOOTH.com use groups (e.g. focusing upon the views of more male service users or those of younger age groups). Likewise, further research is needed with young people who do not engage with online forums, but who do engage with other online counselling services provided. This would provide a more detailed picture of the challenges of online forums for mental health support. It would also be viable for future research areas to focus on how the forums reach a wider audience through those that 'lurk' and are not necessarily active users on the site. The implications of the findings provide some suggestions for improvements to this and other potential forums as well as for the development of web-based service provisions for young people.

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